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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Hartford Connecticut Public School System's Program of Open Informal Education in the Primary Grades Pre-K through 3

Early Childhood Education programs which exist presently in the Hartford Public Schools include the pre-school programs known as the Model Cities 3 year-old program, Headstart and School Readiness for 4 year-olds along with each Kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2 classroom in the twenty-five elementary schools in the city. The name Follow-Through was the umbrella term given to the total instructional program for the primary grades.

Follow-Through, as a term, merely indicates the commitment to continue the gains made by children in the pre-school programs. Under this terminology or umbrella, the observer should find the educational settings utilizing techniques and organizational patterns which reflect individualized learning, informal classrooms, non-graded instruction, differentiated staffing, bi-lingual education and team teaching. Informal, open education, as envisioned by the Hartford schools, is not a method or a packaged system. It is an overall philosophical commitment to children which incorporates and allows for the above-mentioned techniques, systems and patterns.This philosophy can be successful in any physical setting from the self-contained unit in an older building to a modern design created for open planning.

Following is a brief historical and philosphical perspective of the Follow-Through program as developed by the Hartford Board of Education. This represents Hartford's version of one of the most significant ideas to enter public schools in America during the past decade. On a national basis this new approach is being heralded as 'open-education'. Open education, as a theory, has resultedfrom the work of the British Primary

Schools. It is an attempt to humanize and make relevant the lives of children in our schools. When properly and successfully implemented there is mounting evidence abroad and in this country that children become deeply engrossed in their education, more highly motivated, and more self-directed. Additional evidence seems to indicate that these qualities present in children and in classrooms bring about a higher quality of academic achievement. A program of this kind provides the flexibility for meeting the individual needs of children, allows for the total development of the whole child and results in the acquisition of basic skills as they relate to the processes of learning.

The public school system in Hartford, Connecticut, has made a massive effort to restructure the educational program to meet the needs of its children. The Hartford Early Childhood Program now involves more than 9,000 students from 3 years old to second-grade level in over 300 classrooms. The program is being extended to the third-grade level. Classrooms are designed to offer children an environment that encourages them to explore and learn independently. Though ideas have been borrowed from the Montessori approach and British infant schools, Hartford educators have established their own program, fitted to the needs of their urban students.

With a population of over 160,000, Hartford has had problems common to many American cities: racial tensions and riots, many middle-class families moving to the suburbs, decaying neighborhoods, poverty areas, and a feeling of despair in many parts of the community. These problems have also been reflected in the schools in the decreasing attendance rates, instability of the student population, vandalism, and an increasingly poor environment. Hartford educators wanted a school program that would challenge and interest each child and help him to realize his own potential.

In May 1968 a commitment was made by the Hartford Board of Education to establish a model early childhood learning center with an inviting and responsive environment. The Early Childhood Program began at Hartford's Rawson School in September 1968 with 50 children in a mixed-age group of 4- and 5-year olds. In 1969 State and local funds were used to establish the Center as a training model so that the program could subsequently be used in five kindergartens. In 1969-70 the program was adopted for the 60 remaining kindergartens and 10 first grades, and in 1970-71 it also reached 120 first grades and 20 second grades.

During 1971-72 the remaining second grades adopted the program. A pilot program for third grade teachers emphasizing Communication Arts and Math in conjunction with Early Childhood Education philosophy was initiated in 1972-73. Future plans call for continual development of the third grade program, training of other school personnel and a determined effort to get parents involved in training sessions.

The program utilized the resources of the education departments of the University of Hartford and the University of Connecticut. It embodies the following principles of childhood education:

- Formal education should begin at age 3.
- Mixed-age, developmental "family" groupings -- e.g., ages 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 -- should replace grade-level designations.
- Subjects should be combined into various interest centers that are multi-sensory, multi-instructional, and multi-disciplinary.
- Rewards should be intrinsic success goals, not letter

grades or promotion.

- The primary goal should be to maintain an environment that allows each child to achieve and maintain his own "success identity".

Gone are the desks - for both children and the teacher - and the set schedule for various subjects. Replacing them are interest centers which invite students to pursue various activities and a school day that allows them to choose their own time for each activity. Activities are carefully structured to teach a specific skill, and many are manipulative and self-correcting. They may involve commercial materials but more often are based on teacher-made items. The student does many activities alone; he is responsible for his own progress but seeks assistance and direction from the teacher whenever necessary.

A 'systems' approach which is performance - criteria based has been developed wherein individual pupil records are maintained in the major academic areas.

Although the teacher's role has changed from its traditional character, she is still, of course, a vital part of the program. Among her responsibilities are observing and guiding the children, serving as a model, creating curriculum and materials as needed, and keeping student progress records. She encourages the child to direct his own activities, intervening only when necessary.

The teacher is assisted in all her tasks by a para-professional or aide. The aide is a member of the school community, must have a high school diploma or its equivalent, and is hired for full-time assistance

in the classroom. A visitor to a program classroom is often unable to tell which adult is the teacher and which is the aide.

The teacher and para-professional are trained during special sessions and receive help from a resource teacher throughout the school year. Except during training sessions, the resource teachers visit each of their schools frequently, observing each teacher and para-professional and offering assistance and suggestions.

Each school has the opportunity of selecting a Primary Team Communicator who help teachers, administrators and resource teachers articulate program needs and direction.

Because many schools participate in the program, classroom organization varies. In one school, two old classrooms and a smaller storage room have been converted into one large classroom and a small room for cleanup and "motor activity." The classroom has 54 children - ages 4,5, and 6 - with two teachers, one aide, and two student teachers. In another school, classrooms are more typical in size and shape, with about 25 students, one teacher, and one aide.

The classroom environment is built around the child, presenting a warm, welcoming quality that is the result of planning and work sessions in which administrators, teachers, and parents have cooperated to renovate many of the old, inner-city schools. The child-size furniture and the low room-divider shelves - which serve as storage space for kits, games, and manipulative materials - have in many classrooms, been built and painted in bright colors by the teachers and the parents of students. Rooms are divided into areas corresponding to the general divisions of the students' learning activities - housekeeping and practical life, sensory refinement, mathematics, language, science and social studies,

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creative arts and music.

Long rows of desks have no place in these classrooms; instead there are cubbies for each child. Particular classroom areas, however, may contain a low table and several chairs. Bright-colored rugs help to define room areas, and usually children have their own small rugs to sit on in any part of the room. There is generally a painting area and a cleanup area with a sink. The snack table is open all day so that children may eat when they are hungry. In all areas children are responsible for putting away their own materials after using them.

The classroom is a learning environment for children to enjoy and explore. Activities reflect the influence of both the British infant schools and the work of Maria Montessori. As in the British schools, children pursue self-chosen activities individually or in small groups, without a rigid time schedule. As in a Montessori classroom, there are many manipulative materials for the child to use - materials which teach a specific skill; which are interesting to children, and, as much as possible, are self-correcting.

Materials are usually teacher-made, since teachers have found that commercially produced materials are often available in large series or kits, only parts of which are applicable to their needs. Teachers have devised some materials and activities using commercial products in combination with their own. One such item is a science activity which has a commercial balance scale with teacher-prepared objects for weighing. This equipment, together with teacher-prepared instructions in the form of simple picture directions that do not require reading, provides the student with a series of weighing and measuring experiments.

Learning to read is a major objective of the program and is provided by a developmental and sequential program fitted to each child's needs and style; learning in other subject areas however is not postponed until the child learns to read. To guide the student toward language arts proficiency, however, teachers have made "touch alphabets" with letters of wood or sandpaper; special lined paper so that children can fit the letters onto the lines; a shallow box with a thin layer of sand in which the child can "write" and "erase" letters; and series of cards with pictures of objects and corresponding words. Such activities develop the student's reading skills without making him feel pressured toward reading.

Children work independently, but teachers and aides keep close track of their progress, offering reinforcement and special help when needed, encouraging them, but never forcing their pace. Freedom to pursue activities in a group stimulates social growth, accountability for one's own learning activities encourages responsibility, and sharing responsibility for facilities and materials develops group cooperation.

One of the strongest features of the program is the training provided for teachers and paraprofessionals who are required to attend a training session approximately three weeks long

The training sessions are conducted by the program director and the resource teachers. The main purpose is to have adults, who work with children learn what the children do in the program; trainers believe that only by going through the children's activities can adults understand how the program works and what guidance the children need. The training center classroom has all the materials and equipment that go into program

classrooms. During the training session each "student" must complete a wide variety of activities. The activities are typical of those which would be carried on in the classrooms. This training center is maintained as an on-going 'renewal center' during the year for teachers to return to for reinforcement, for meetings or for making and learning about new materials, techniques, etc.

The director and resource teachers report that during the training sessions the adults learn a great deal more than how to complete specific activities. For example, they learn the basic classroom rules suggested for all program classrooms, such as "Return each material to the same place and in the same condition in which you found it." Training encourages flexibility and creativity in each adult's use of the program; the teacher's classroom will reflect the individual approach best suited to her and her students.

During training, teachers and aides also make many materials which they can use in their classrooms, such as classification cards, double sandpaper letters, a color-cued chart, and a phonogram dictionary.

Training activities also help teachers and aides to develop new ideas. At one training session, participants were asked to design and make a musical instrument, telling what they had constructed and what music they would select.

As a result of participation in training sessions, parents are better able to understand "open education", and what this means to their child in terms of classroom experiences.

Throughout the training sessions, emphasis is placed on helping adults to grow and to approach their potential. Four words are repeatedly stressed - trust, love, respect, and commitment. These words indicate the attitudes toward children and education that trainers try to instill in program personnel.

The difference between traditional classrooms and the program classrooms is striking. As more teachers are trained in the new approach, more classrooms are transformed from self-contained rooms with children sitting at rows of desks and the teacher at the front, to multi-faceted rooms with children engaged in different activities throughout the various areas and the teacher and aide circulating to give needed assistance. Observations by teachers and visitors indicate that children in these classrooms have more opportunity for activity, independence and self-direction, cooperation, and creativity -- and that they are benefiting from these experiences.